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Espionage—But No Escape

For Novelist Charles McCarry, Late of the CIA, the Spy Thriller Is a Metaphor

By Jean M. White

IN HIS 10 YEARS with the CIA, Charles McCarry will tell you, there were two kinds of men that he never met: "One was an assassin and the other a Republican."

But he did know many versions of Paul Christopher, the covert agent who moves under deep cover through McCarry's espionage novels, which became a trilogy with the appearance of "The Secret Lovers" a few weeks ago.

Those of the McCarry cult use such terms as "early Eric Ambler" and "the American Le Carré." The nearer truth is that he is mature McCarry. Under cover of a spy thriller, a serious novelist is writing about what he knows—espionage—as a metaphor to comment on Americans of his generation, living in a time that has tested American values and beliefs, both in public and private lives.

"It's difficult to explain without sounding like a pompous ass," McCarry says. "What I thought is that I could use the framework of the thriller in much the same way that Dickens used the format of the Victorian novel of melodrama to comment on the social issues of his day.

"Christopher's life is the life of 20th-century Americans, at least a certain class. It (the trilogy) moves from the innocence of 'The Miernik Dossier' to the cold professionalism of 'The Secret Lovers' through the destructive—no, cruel—idealism of 'The Tears of Autumn.'"

McCarry may write espionage thrillers. But they are not escape literature.

I'm convinced that there is no more intelligent or unemotional group of men on earth than ourselves. That, if I may say so, is our principal weakness. Because our people are so bright, because our resources are so huge, we consistently tinker with reality . . . We have come to look on our work, in the field at least, largely as a sport.—Statement by Paul Christopher, American intelligence agent, in "The Miernik Dossier"

McCarry agrees with his fictional hero:

"The men that I worked with in the agency were the most honorable and ethical in personal relationships of any men with whom I have ever worked."

McCarry is a former small-town newspaperman, one-time speechwriter for Eisenhower Labor Secretary James Mitchell and Republican Vice Presidential candidate Henry Cabot Lodge in 1960, former deep-cover operative for the CIA, magazine writer of profiles of film stars, politicians and

He had motored to Washington from his home in Northampton, Mass., and was sipping tea at the dining-room table in a friend's apartment. Rod MacLeish, television commentator and columnist, also has tried a hand at thrillers with "The Man Who Wasn't There." The book plotters sometimes are joined by another friend, Richard Condon, author of "Winter Kills."

McCarry was going to be 47 in a few days. He is Paul Christopher—10 years later, 10 pounds heavier, an inch or two shorter, perhaps not as tough, certainly with more play of humor; a solid, stocky man with a roundish, open face; medium height, medium brown, medium age. Nothing that quickly distinguishes on first appearance—an asset for any spy.

The fictional Paul Christopher, who gave up writing poetry, probably will never leave the agency. McCarry did in 1967, to write novels.

It was six years before "The Miernik Dossier" appeared in print. Then came "The Tears of Autumn," a stunningly credible scenario for the assassination of President Kennedy, which became a hardback best-seller in England and France and has sold more than a half-million paperback copies in the United States.

McCarry still is trying to convince people that it isn't a true story.

His talent, the gift of the operative, was to separate from years of talk the one phrase that betrayed the truth, and from miles of action the single deed that revealed the person.—Said of Paul Christopher in "The Secret Lovers"

The gift of the operative—for the telling, betraying detail—also is the gift of the novelist.

In "The Secret Lovers," McCarry has written a rich-textured, multi-layered novel—a tale of an espionage coup to smuggle a manuscript out of the Soviet Union; the love story of Paul and Cathy, who wants a perfect union with a man and can't accept Paul's secret life apart from her; a study of men and women who consciously chose to be professional spies, often at fearful cost to their personal lives.

McCarry can sear the memory with spare sentences and the taut phrasing of an intelligence report. Paul and Cathy use "love" as a code word to signal his return to Rome on the 1 a.m. plane. Then comes a cry of loneliness from Cathy in Spain and Paul wants to send her a note of assurance but:

"Because they had made it into a code, he couldn't use the word 'love' in a telegram."

Christopher saw the truth at daun on the tenth day after the death of Kennedy . . . He knew who had arranged the death of the President.—"The Tears of Autumn"

McCarry was with the CIA when Kennedy was assassinated. He was on assignment in the Congo when he got the news (just as Christopher does in "Tears") from a Belgian priest listening to a transistor radio in an airport.

After weeks in the Congo, he had come back to Rome, tired and with a bad stomach ("as people do who spend six weeks in the Congo"). He and his wife, Nancy, decided to go to their favorite retreat in Siena. There— again as Christopher does in "Tears"—McCarry was awakened on a cold dawn and, looking out the hotel window, saw two Italian farmers in black hurrying to the edge of a woods.

"The idea clicked in my mind," McCarry recalls. "What I did was write a scenario for a perfect operation where everything goes right. Truth in art and life is not the same . . . 'Tears' is entirely a work of imagination.

"Unlike Paul, when the idea clicked, I didn't take off and solve the murder."

Neither did McCarry take off and write. He waited until seven years after he left the CIA to publish "Tears" and then only after the Pentagon Papers had detailed American involvement in the overthrow of Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem.

McCarry's "perfect operation" in fiction is so simple, so fascinatingly logical: The Vietnamese troc (family) of Ngo answered insult for insult, blood for blood, for the death of Diem by arranging, through a Cuban-Russian connection, to recruit an unstable Oswald to pull the actual trigger to kill the American President.